

Getting up or selling out? Contemporary street art as public communication and artistic practice

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Abstract

The past thirty years have seen the increasing ubiquity of a multitude of forms of urban inscription in our cities. While significant academic work has been committed to exploring graffiti in a number of ways, less attention has been paid toward the emergence of the specific practice of “street art”. Focusing on the prolific UK based street artist Banksy, this paper presents a case study and discourse analysis of Banksy’s book *Wall and Piece* in order to explore the intersections of art, politics, and commerce, and how they come to be configured through this emerging form of urban inscription. Principally drawing from Michel de Certeau’s conceptualization around tactics, Pierre Lefebvre’s idea of appropriation, and Howard Becker’s characterization of the maverick artist, I suggest that the apparent contradictions between the antiestablishment themes in Banksy’s work and the trajectory of his own commercially and critically successful career gesture towards a negotiated flexibility that is inherent in this emerging form of urban artistic expression that meaningfully differentiates street art from other forms of graffiti.

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Introduction

In February 2007, the art auction house Sotheby's presented seven art works produced by the prolific UK-based street artist Banksy in an auction of contemporary art that was held over two days (Roberts, 2007). Banksy's piece *Bombing Middle England*, an acrylic and spray paint stencil on canvas, featuring relatively innocuous-looking lawn bowlers, was expected to fetch between £30,000 and £50,000; with the total sum expected for all of his works exceeding £167,000 (Roberts, 2007) (Appendix, Figure 1). In actuality, *Bombing Middle England* sold for £102,000, over double the highest expected price, at the time it was the most expensive Banksy work sold ("Record price", 2007). Explaining the presence of a form of artistic urban inscription that is typically restricted to the streets in a high art auction house, Cheyenne Westphal, chairman of contemporary art for Sotheby's Europe, said "Banksy is an exciting artist and we are delighted to be offering further works by him. He has an unnerving ability to get to the heart of the matter and is able to express strong political statements with poetry, energy and humour" (as cited by Roberts, 2007, para. 3). After the first day of auctions, the main page of Banksy's website was updated with a sketched image of a scene depicting an auctioneer presiding over a crowd bidding for a piece, which prominently featured the words, "I can't believe you morons actually buy this shit", and in March, a print edition of *Morons* was featured on the website of the street art print company, Pictures on Walls, for sale (Collins, 2007) (Appendix, Figure 2). Due to high traffic, it crashed the site for five hours (Collins, 2007).

I would like to suggest that the presence of Banksy's works in the hallowed walls of Sotheby's presents an interesting point of departure inviting further inquiry examining the changing form of graffiti and public inscription in the spaces of our cities. Since its rise in 1980s

urban New York, graffiti, as a form of urban inscription, has achieved a near ubiquitous presence in urban centres, and coinciding with this is the emergence of hotly contested debates over the value and validity of this cultural form. Graffiti has been characterized as crime, the unsanctioned, illegal vandalism and defacement of space; the expression of difference, as a “modern touchstone of urban discontent” and dissent; assertions of gang territoriality and a means of resistance (McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011, p. 128). But the meteoric rise of street artists such as Banksy, the positive reception of their work in the art establishment, and the subsequent commercialization of their work evidently problematize any singular interpretations of street art as a subversive countercultural art form.

In the midst of such multifarious and often dichotomous perspectives on these developing forms of urban inscription emerges the question of *how* to make sense of the complex and often contradictory themes evident in this practice. How do we reconcile the antiestablishment, countercultural themes evident in street art with the growing celebrity of some street artists and the increasing ubiquity of street art imagery in commercial contexts – and perhaps most importantly, how can we understand how such tensions configure into and characterize this practice of urban inscription? Indeed, the themes in Banksy’s works and the trajectory of his career provide ideas for how we might go about developing a better understanding of street art and how the intersections between art, politics, and commerce come to be configured through this form of urban inscription and the paths taken by its practitioners.

Utilizing a case study of Banksy and his book *Wall and Piece*, my Honours Thesis aims to examine the contexts of production, distribution, and reception of Banksy’s work – and the discursive themes prevalent in his art – to reconsider the changing nature of urban forms of expression in the spaces of our cities. Ultimately, my thesis gestures towards an understanding of

street art as an emerging form of urban inscription that is more consciously and flexibly positioned at the intersections of art, politics, and commerce, complexifying traditional conceptions of this form that are bound by spatial fixity and defined by dichotomies.

Defining the field: Graffiti in transition

Before establishing the traditions in research around graffiti and street art, a clarification of the terms *graffiti* and *street art* is necessary. Most generally, graffiti is understood as the process of producing sanctioned or unsanctioned drawings and writings in public space (Brighenti, 2010; Chmielewska, 2007; Gross & Gross, 1993; Lachmann, 1988). Other forms of graffiti include political graffiti, latrinalia (graffiti in bathrooms and toilet stalls), and gang graffiti. Street art is distinct from graffiti not only on the basis of its use of media and tools beyond the aerosol paint used by traditional graffiti artists (Dickens, 2008; Droney, 2010; McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011), but also aesthetically and qualitatively. As Manco (2004) suggests, with street art there is a “revolt against generic styles” and the new vanguard of street artists is consciously “breaking the unwritten graffiti rules to create new graphic forms and images outside 3-D and wildstyle lettering” typical of traditional graffiti (Manco, 2004, p. 7). The argument for distinguishing this aesthetic shift is most perhaps most pointed when tracing the evolution of the “tag”, considered the core unit of graffiti writing; though it has been typified as a textual symbol with exaggerated graphic representation, it is being increasingly replaced by what Manco (2004) calls “street logos”, exemplifying a shift from typographic to iconographic forms of inscription. He attributes this turn to an increasing awareness among street artists to the growing visual spectacle of commercial imagery and advertising present in the public space, suggesting that this new form of urban inscription is linked with a pressing cognizance of our increasingly commercialized environment. Therefore, Manco observes that “[t]oday’s graffiti

landscape is becoming unrecognizable from that of previous decades” (as cited by Dickens, 2008, p. 473).

Though contemporaneously, street art – in tandem with the more “traditional” form of graffiti – has become ubiquitous in the spaces of our cities and as such, is at the forefront of the recent surge of popular interest in graffiti culture and urban inscription more generally, there has not been a comprehensive attempt in the academic literature to further elucidate and distinguish between the two forms, and in many cases, the term *graffiti* has been used to encompass street art and other forms of expression that are unsanctioned in the public space. Some scholars have used the appellation “post-graffiti” or “new graffiti” to describe street art, but there has not been a universally accepted term used in the scholarship to describe the rise of this new cultural form; to remain consistent, however, this paper will use *street art* when referring to the emerging contemporary forms of graffiti as referred to by Manco previously; and graffiti when referring to the general phenomenon of writing in public space (Burnham, 2010; Droney, 2010; Schiller, 2004).

Despite the tendency of policymakers to treat urban inscription as a homogenous practice, as a global phenomenon, this form of cultural expression exists in the spaces of our cities in a multitude of styles. The most recognizable form of graffiti and the most explored in academic scholarship is hip hop graffiti, which many consider to be the first contemporary form of graffiti that has achieved global reach and impact (Brewer, 1992; McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011; MacDowall; 2008). Hip hop graffiti has long been considered as one of the key cultural forms associated with hip hop subculture, the others being DJing, MCing, break dancing, and beatboxing (Castleman, 1982; Mailer & Naar, 1974; Powers, 1996).

Academic scholarship on graffiti is generally the most comprehensive and developed in the fields of sociology and social anthropology (Bowen, 1999). Substantial work has been accomplished examining the history and growth of graffiti as a cultural form and the social activity of creating graffiti (Castleman, 1982; Gauthier, 1998; Lachmann, 1988). Focusing on New York City based graffiti artists in the late 70s and early 80s, Castleman (1982) explored the rise and growth of graffiti in the New York subway system, as well as the civic authorities' attempts to eradicate it. Through in-depth interviews and documentary research, Castleman described the social dynamics of the New York subway graffiti community, outlining their methods of "getting up" (the term used by graffiti artists for successfully painting and displaying their work in the public space), as well as the social mechanisms the community developed to share artistic ideas, collectively create work, and generate social value around that work. Though primarily a descriptive study, Castleman's research set the stage for further sociological inquiry into the graffiti world, inviting researchers to explore the questions: *why* is graffiti made, and *what* is the social significance of it?

Following Castleman, Lachmann (1988) similarly traced the social organization of gang-affiliated graffiti artists and their ideological motivations for the production of graffiti in an ethnographic analysis. Synthesizing an analytical framework combining theories of subcultures, deviance, and art worlds, Lachmann found that graffiti artists typically generated ideological support for their work through their social relations by building an audience among this network – thus enforcing the belief that developing recognition for their graffiti would lead to fame. However, the escalation of graffiti eradication programs led to a fragmentation of the graffiti community, affecting its organizational cohesion and thus the ideological basis for their work. In his analysis, Lachmann contended that given the multifaceted nature of graffiti production – and

the complex social relations involved in that production – sociological analyses of graffiti culture and community must take into account that though graffiti artists learn behaviours and beliefs through their social relations, this knowledge also comes to interact with their broader experience with society at large. Thus, attempts to explore the dynamics of graffiti culture must be grounded by the understanding that the graffiti community is very much a part of greater society and therefore will interact with it in complex and often ambiguous ways.

Alongside such sociological and anthropological studies of graffiti, significant academic scholarship has been devoted to exploring the question of whether graffiti should be characterized as art or crime (Austin, 2010; McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011). Those who characterize graffiti as criminal deviance have examined the connections between the graffiti art community and crime, suggesting that graffiti artists often affiliate with gang organizations (Glazer, 1979; Lachmann, 1988) and that graffiti artists themselves are more likely to be petty criminals – that graffiti acts as a “gateway” for more serious crimes (Glazer, 1979). The cornerstone of many studies in this vein is the Broken Windows theory, initially expanded on by Wilson and Kelling, which postulates that signs of urban disorder, such as broken windows, litter, and graffiti, promote the perception of chaos and lawlessness in a community, and thus lead to more serious crimes (Gendelman, 2004; McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011; Wilson & Kelling, 1982). Therefore, Wilson and Kelling argue that the unimpeded proliferation of graffiti on the streets promotes the public perception that there is a lack of control on part of the authorities, suggesting an erosion of community values. In this theoretical lens, graffiti is seen as a minor transgression of normative behavior that will have serious implications if ignored (McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011). As such, these studies tend to advocate for the introduction of public policy that will deter, re-direct, or abolish graffiti writing altogether (Brewer, 1992; Glazer, 1979; Wilson & Kelling, 1982).

However, as McAuliffe and Iveson (2011) argue, many interpretations of graffiti as deviance fail to capture the complexity of the process of characterizing graffiti as crime, and forego the crucial questions: “what kind of crime is graffiti, and what is at stake in its criminalization?” (2011, p. 130). In dissecting these questions, it is suggested that *how* citizens and policymakers characterize and talk about graffiti reveal the relationships of power, and the public values, that configure into discourse around public space (Gendelman, 2004; McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011). As McAuliffe and Iveson suggest, “[m]oral codes are revealed whenever their limits are transgressed. Thus graffiti, as a transgressive performance in space, tells us much of the ways space is configured, constructed, and reproduced in the city” (McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011, p. 129). With this in mind, some research has been committed to examining how receptions and reactions to graffiti reveal discourses around space and how citizens create meaning around the public spaces of their city. For example, Gendelman (2004) completed an analysis of local newspaper articles and community forum notes in Olympia, Washington addressing the presence of graffiti in Olympia’s downtown core. In doing so, she argued that when the nature of public discourse (such as in the news media) frames subaltern groups as threatening, the implementation of policies of control becomes justified in the midst of public anxiety, evidenced by the comments she analyzed from the community meeting. As such, Gendelman concluded that the Broken Windows theory indeed seems to be a commonly invoked paradigm in public discussions around graffiti and public space. However, though the prevailing opinion of citizens at the forum was that the presence of graffiti damaged the local economy, most participants argued that this because of the *perception* of the threat. Therefore, Gendelman suggests that the Broken Windows theory fails to account for the complexity inherent in public discourse around graffiti and the social and political organization of public space. Unilaterally

framing graffiti as crime and assessing its societal impact through such an interpretive lens limits the possibilities of fully elucidating the dynamics of such a complex cultural practice and form.

With the advent of graphic anthologies dedicated to creating a record of urban graffiti (see *Graffiti World – Street Art From Five Continents* [Ganz, 2004] and *The Faith of Graffiti* [Norman Mailer and Jon Laar, 1974]) – and no doubt aided by the increasing acceptance of graffiti by the art establishment and the emergence of artworks incorporating the graffiti aesthetic by artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring – there have also been efforts to dissect graffiti as an aesthetic practice (Austin, 2010; MacDowall, 2008b; Stewart, 1989). In their work, tracing the historical changes of new aesthetic forms of graffiti, Gross and Gross (1993) outlined three distinct phases of graffiti inscription: imitative, transition, and apocryphal. At the time of writing, the authors suggested that contemporary forms of graffiti were merely new, more complex iterations of the same graffiti scrawls that have been inscribed in urban public places for centuries. Stewart (1989) accedes this point; but also suggests that the emerging contemporary forms of graffiti are developing historically distinct aesthetic qualities. Far from being a mindless tag created by an isolated individual to a mostly imagined audience, by the late 1980s graffiti forms began to emerge that suggested deliberate aesthetic intentions, whose size and complexity (both of the works and the social organization of its production) defied any typology of graffiti aesthetics up to that point. In this way, graffiti art can be understood as a “radical disruption in the history of graffiti [as a common signature and deviant act]” (Stewart as cited by Austin, 2010).

Other scholars, building on these explorations of the aesthetics of graffiti, have also examined graffiti as art. Through this perspective, graffiti is interpreted as the aesthetic response to social changes in the urban environment. This framework traces graffiti’s development as an

artistic and cultural form along the concurrent development of alternative art movements during the “pluralist decade” in which aesthetic forms were fragmenting and decentralizing within the established New York City art scene (Austin, 2010). This is particularly true of graffiti’s early development in the seventies and late eighties in New York City, where it was closely associated with marginalized populations’ struggles for social identity and the concurrent exploration of the aesthetic expression of these struggles (Austin, 2010). Austin (2010) points to the possibly productive interpretive framework situating graffiti art within the tradition of avant-garde movements of dada, neo-dada and pop art that directly engage with the materiality of the city. In situating graffiti art within an established artistic lineage, Austin (2010) draws parallels between the avant-garde aesthetic forms of *collage* – the incorporation of symbols and materials from everyday life into art in order to provoke artistic, social, or political critique – and *montage* – the juxtaposition of novel comparisons to rouse alternative interpretations – and the techniques of the symbolic and aesthetic appropriation and juxtapositions frequently utilized by graffiti artists. Indeed, many contemporary street artists, such as Banksy and Shepard Fairey, not only appropriate widely circulated public images in their work, but play with the spaces of the city, choosing to place their works in locations where the juxtaposition of the work within the space has meaning. In this way, Burnham (2010) suggests that graffiti artists play with the spaces of the city in a sort of “call and response” between artists and the urban environment, incorporating the materials and nuances of the city’s landscape into their work.

In opposition to approaches that position graffiti as criminal vandalism, Austin (2010) suggests that explorations of graffiti must shift their perspective and utilize an analytical framework that emphasizes the aesthetics of graffiti. He advocates for a shift in perspective by focusing on graffiti as art and urban visual culture, thus repositioning graffiti as a possible

enhancement to everyday life (2010). Embodying this turn is Austin's proposal of the use of the term *graffiti art*, which he believes differentiates this particular type of graffiti from the belligerent, aimless signature tags associated with petty vandalism (2010). As he suggests, "graffiti art is neither 'simply graffiti' nor 'simply art', but a new kind of visual cultural production that *exceeds both categories*" (2010, p. 33, emphasis added). For Austin, graffiti's key contribution to *art* lies in its positioning among the spaces of our cities, as he argues the inherent illegality of graffiti on public walls represents a new potential trajectory for modern art that takes art from beyond the institutionalized space of the gallery into the streets (2010). In this context, graffiti is seen as a potentially valuable contemporary artistic form emerging from the public arenas of our cities.

At the same time, graffiti clearly problematizes traditional conceptions around what constitutes art (Austin, 2010; Burnham, 2010; McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011). This is because graffiti is fundamentally an illegal act occurring in the public space – it does not "comfortably" exist within the spaces of institutionalized art, and usually, its intended audience is not the moneyed elite who serve as the established art world's primary patrons (Austin, 2010). Grounding this understanding is an acknowledgement that as an artistic practice that takes place in the public space within a particular community of individuals, graffiti is also an inherently spatial practice. Generally, little academic research has been dedicated to examining graffiti as spatial practice, though many authors have touched upon it (Austin, 2010; Brighenti, 2010; Burnham, 2010; Dickens, 2008; McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011). However, the work that has been completed examining graffiti's role in the public space tends towards idealism, particularly in discussions on this role and graffiti's potential impact on social change. In his conclusion, Austin (2010) argues that graffiti, by disrupting the normative visual patterns of public space – i.e., the

reign of commercial imagery and the adherence to codes regarding private property – graffiti serves as a sort of wake-up call asserting that this “common sense aesthetic is not an adequate reflection of our collective everyday lives” (p. 43). He ends his study with the assertion that graffiti art, in its offering of a new perspective of our everyday lives, gives the hope that “another visual order is possible, and so another city is possible, and so another life is possible as well” (p. 44). As Guy Debord argues, “[w]hat changes our way of seeing the streets is more important than what changes our way of seeing painting.” (Debord as cited by Burnham, 2010, p. 139). Similarly embracing this perspective, Burnham (2010) suggests that graffiti and street art is a fertile source of creativity for urban planning and development, acting as an example of not only art, but also “open source urban design”, offering new ways of interacting and working with the spaces of the city (p. 139).

This idealism is important, as it reminds us of the potential impacts graffiti and street art can make in the space of our everyday lives. But at the same time, I would argue that such studies overemphasize graffiti’s potential for social or political change by failing to account for the broader structural organization and cultural practices of society – which, as previously mentioned, Lachmann (1988) emphasizes as important in influencing the ideological and practical motivations of graffiti artists.

Indeed, the rise of street artists such as Banksy and Shepard Fairey – who have catapulted to fame, become accepted among the established art world and as a result, received worldwide exposure – adds a layer of complexity to interpretations of graffiti as a potentially revolutionary form. Furthermore, graffiti and street art’s association with an alternative underground subculture has led to its appropriation by companies looking to profit from its marketability as “cool” (Borghini, 2010; Visconti et. al, 2010). Corporations such as Nike, IBM, Sprite and Sony

have all used guerilla marketing techniques mimicking the aesthetics of graffiti and street art, and clothing companies such as Victoria's Secret have mass-produced clothing adorned with replications of graffiti tags (Gendelman, 2004; Droney, 2010). In this way, Borghini et. al (2010) suggest that street art can be used as a template for commercial advertising and its associated messaging – and that advertisers should increasingly look to the aesthetic and rhetorical techniques utilized by street artists to more effectively market their products, a strategy that will undoubtedly affect the interplay between the worlds of commerce and street art. Does the symbiotic posturing between street art and commerce that has become prevalent in both the techniques and imagery of street art affect its potential social impact? Droney (2010) examines the dynamics of this question in his ethnographic study of the Los Angeles street art community. While there was some disagreement among the street artists he interviewed, most suggested that a negotiated sort of irony takes place – street artists draw from their urban environment to create a playful commentary of our everyday lives; but at the same time, this critical lens is contextualized within street artists' quest for success (and in some cases, fame) and the *practical* needs they must fulfill to be able to continue their work. Droney's research points to a need within the academic scholarship on graffiti and street art to emphasize the contextualization of the creation of street art within the wider web of social relations and environments in which these artists and their communities exist and draw meaning from.

Bowen (1999), McAuliffe and Iveson (2011) all point to a need to further elucidate and move beyond the myopic and often dichotomous characterizations of graffiti and other forms of urban inscription such as street art. To this end, McAuliffe and Iveson (2011) argue that each of the dominant analytical frameworks used to explore graffiti fail to adequately capture the breadth of the graffiti phenomenon. That is not to say that each is wholly inaccurate; rather, the authors

suggest that each is inaccurate *on its own*. The challenge for researchers then becomes how to articulate the relationship between these divergent frameworks to better understand street art – and *how* to take into account its increasingly apparent complexity, all the while maintaining that “the art on the wall and those who produce it are riven with multitude subjectives”, something that needs to be emphasized in further scholarship seeking to elucidate the multifaceted nature of graffiti and street art (McAuliffe & Iveson, 2010, p. 141).

Yet, despite the fact that a significant portion of existing research has been dedicated to examining graffiti in the lenses of criminal transgression, art, and identity politics, there have not been comprehensive attempts in the literature to further elucidate these intersections as they configure within the more recent style of urban inscription known as street art (Dickens, 2008). With this apparent gap comes a need to develop new perspectives on the intersections between art, politics, and commerce, and how they come to be configured through the emerging practice of street art and the paths taken by its practitioners. How can we make sense of these new directions in graffiti, and in what ways does this new form of street art break with traditional graffiti?

Methodology

To explore this emerging form of urban inscription, I have adopted a dual methodological approach, conducting a case study on a prominent contemporary street artist, Banksy, as well as a visual and textual discourse analysis of materials focused on his work and the trajectory of his career. Utilizing these methodological tools in tandem allowed me to explore Banksy’s the production, distribution, and general reception of Banksy’s work in-depth, tracing the various currents of art, politics, and commerce that interweave through all these stages of artistic

production. Furthermore, the inclusion of a case study allowed me to ground my visual and textual analysis to bridge the divide between the text and the social contexts of its production.

The decision to concentrate my research on a prominent artist such as Banksy was primarily due to research constraints: primarily the short research timeline, and my lack of access to the local Vancouver street artist community. Conducting a case study of an established street artist with global reach ensures access to a wealth of information through secondary sources such as popular media publications. Banksy has an easily accessible website, as well as both self-published and mass-published books, providing rich primary source information for analysis. Beyond research constraints, though, Banksy's work presents a significant opportunity to explore street art as a new urban form of expression and inscription in our cities. The themes in Banksy's work and the trajectory of his career thus provide ideas for how we might go about developing a better understanding of street art and how the intersections between art, politics, and commerce come to be configured through this form of urban inscription and the paths taken by its practitioners.

In order to further explore the multifarious ways in which art, politics, and commerce intersect in Banksy's work and how such tensions are further negotiated and communicated by the stakeholders in these worlds, I have undertaken a visual and textual analysis of selections from Banksy's book, *Wall and Piece* (published by Random House in 2005), a visual anthology containing selections of the artist's work. *Wall and Piece* proved to be a particularly rich source of analysis, not only did it provide a significant amount of visual material to work with, but many of the photographs in these books are accompanied by either Banksy's commentary on the motivation for or production of the piece itself, or essays relating to the street art phenomenon more generally. Given the book's proximity to the word of the artist himself, I would argue that

it also provides a good indication of what Banksy is attempting to communicate to the public. As such, the book itself can be understood as a site where meanings and understandings coalesce around the presented art works.

Given the centrality of both image and text in *Cut It Out* and *Wall and Piece*, I have adopted visual analysis in tandem with discourse analysis to be able to fully examine the layers of meaning generated through the combination of image and text in these two books. To guide this portion of my analysis I utilized an iconographical approach as outlined by Edwin Panofsky; visual semiotics, particularly the concepts denotation and connotation, also served as methodological constructs structuring my examination. Given that these approaches are premised on the idea of layered meaning – that images consist “first of all of a layer of representational or denotative meaning...on which is then superimposed a layer of connotative or symbolic meaning” (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p. 2) – they are particularly productive methodological tools for dissecting the polysemous nature of Banksy’s work. To direct my analysis, I have primarily relied on the three-tiered analytical structure initially conceptualized by Panofsky, which consists of examining the *representational meaning*, *iconographical symbolism*, and *iconological symbolism* in an image (Panofsky, 1962). Panofsky’s model separates the analysis of the denotative features of an image from its connotative features, emphasizing representational recognition as “separate from the understanding of the conventional meanings that may be associated with what is represented” (van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 100). In this way, Panofsky’s methodological framework serves as a functional model for researchers to dissect and distinguish between the multitudes of meanings generated by an image and to be able to draw connections – and identify inconsistencies – between meanings as they occur at each level.

Discourse analysis was additionally used as a primary methodological tool. As a methodology, discourse analysis is primarily concerned with the role of language in constructing our social reality; as Hawthorn suggests, discourse is language use “seen from the point of view of the beliefs, values and categories which it embodies; these beliefs constitute a way of looking at the world, and organization or representation of experience” (as cited in Deacon et. al, 2007, p. 152). Therefore, discourse is seen as a practice that is deeply rooted with culturally embedded ways of not only experiencing, but *understanding* and communicating a particular conception of social life. As Deacon et. al point out:

What we identify as ‘discourse’ and what we identify as ‘social’ are deeply intertwined... We build up our sense of the social world through the language we use, the talk we hear, the words we combine, while any sustained strips of social action and interaction would not be possible without the language we use, in specific cultural and historical contexts, as a means for engaging with them. (2007, p. 152).

Thus, discourse analysis allows the researcher to focus on discourse as not only a social practice, but also as a form of representation that reflects certain values, beliefs, and interests through a specific point of view – a particular conception of social reality. In this way, discourse analysis relates the “text” to the wider “context”, allowing researchers to focus on the “complex relationships between structures *or strategies of discourse* and both the local and global, social and political context” (van Dijk as cited by Fairclough, 1992, p. 193, emphasis added).

Discourse analysis was particularly suited to guide my research, given that my primary objective was to explore the intersections between art, politics, and commerce apparent in contemporary street art and how the social actors involved in this process reconciled the divides between these domains. Discourse analysis allowed me to focus on texts written and organized

by Banksy – in order to explore how the street artist himself negotiates and addresses these tensions in discursive texts that are circulated in the public. As Fairclough argues, “discourse analysis can be understood as an attempt to show systematic links between texts, discourse practices, and sociocultural practices” (as cited by Deacon et. al, 2007, p. 152). This principle grounded my understanding of Banksy’s book as not only manifest of the ideological motivations underpinning his art, but as “traces” of the intersecting themes of art, politics, and commerce apparent in his work, his career, and more broadly, the street art phenomenon itself that are continually contested within the discursive text itself.

In completing my discourse analysis of *Wall and Piece*, the framework developed by Norman Fairclough was used to loosely guide the direction of the examination. While Fairclough’s work is principally concerned with critical discourse analysis (CDA) – an area of examination whose primary aim is to explore the relations of power embedded in text and discourse, something deliberately bracketed off in my Thesis – his model proved useful in providing an outline for undertaking my own analysis. Fairclough’s model for CDA consists of three levels of analysis, each which relate to three interconnected categories of discourse: firstly, textual analysis (description), focusing on the discursive level of the object of analysis itself; secondly, processing analysis (interpretation), focusing on the processes by which the object is produced and received by its subjects; and thirdly, social analysis (explanation), focusing on the sociohistorical and political conditions that influence these discursive processes. (Janks, 1997).

As Janks (1997) points out, Fairclough’s model is useful for two primary reasons: firstly, it allows the researcher to focus on the text, concentrating analysis on the signifiers contained within the text, lexical choice and combination, narrative structure – in other words, the “meat” of the text itself. However, more importantly Fairclough’s framework also emphasizes the

historical specificity of the discourses invoked in these texts “in order to understand that these choices are tied to the conditions of possibility” (Janks, 1997, p. 329). In this way, texts are understood as “instantiations of socially regulated discourses and that the processes of production and reception are socially constrained”, refocusing again on the conception of language as social practice (Janks, 1997, p. 329). Furthermore, Fairclough’s model for text-based discourse analysis works quite seamlessly in tandem with Panofsky’s model of visual analysis as the levels prescribed for analysis in both frameworks point to similarly situated analytical steps; given the presence of both image and text in Banksy’s books, these models have been combined in my analysis in order to take into account of how image and text work together in order to create complex meanings around the entire textual artifact (i.e., the artworks, and the book) itself. In this way, the image coupled with the text in *Wall and Piece* has been analyzed as evidence of the multitudes of meanings their author and maker have drawn from in order to construct, reconstruct, and communicate their reality – as an indication of ideologically driven interpretation (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001).

Theoretical Framework

While much attention has been dedicated to analyzing graffiti and forms of urban inscription in the theoretical lens of spatial practice and subcultural theory, relatively little has been devoted to exploring graffiti as an artistic practice operating within the realm of the established art world. For this reason, I have chosen to primarily draw upon two schools of theory.

Firstly, in exploring the connections between street art and the art world, I have principally grounded my analysis around Howard Becker’s theory of art worlds and his typology of artists. In analyzing the socially situated contexts of artistic production, utilizing a social

interactionist approach, such as the one advanced by Becker, is particularly useful as it brings to the fore questions around the influence of social settings on the collective creation of meaning around the artistic product. For Becker, artistic production must be understood first and foremost as a *social production*, rather than the output of one particular individual: “works of art can be understood by viewing them as the result of the coordinated activities of all the people and organizations whose *activity is necessary to produce the kind of events and objects which that world characteristically produces*” (Becker, 1976, p. 703, emphasis added).

Becker questions the assumption that art worlds operate autonomously – and as such, free from the influence of – other areas of collective activity, and secondly, other mediating organizational or structural constraints that influence these other forms of collective activity. In opposition to this, Becker challenges the “assumption of [art worlds’] freedom from economic, political, and organizational constraint” (1982, p. 39). In this way, it is understood that art is intimately connected with concerns of practicality, money, and commerce (1982). Thus, a key implication of Becker’s theory that “every aspect of the art world provides a set of resources and constraints for making art” (Alexander, 2003, p. 68) is that artworks are ultimately influenced by *the entire system that contributes to its production* – not simply by the artist whom we attribute authorship to. Becker’s framework is thus useful in advancing the approach that Lachmann (1988) advocates, contextualizing ideological motivations (and the production of knowledge and values leading to such motivations) within the wider context of cultural and social production. In this social-interactionist paradigm, the meaning of an artwork is understood as socially constructed, as a product of the social relations and collaborative systems of meaning and practice from which it arises. This is particularly pertinent in his discussion around professionals,

mavericks, and folk artists, a typology he outlines to describe how the ways in which artists are connected to art worlds affects their work (Becker, 1982).

To analyze street art as communication in public space and political action, I have based my analysis on the work of Henri Lefebvre, Guy Debord, and Michel de Certeau; particularly their concepts of *appropriation*, *détournement*, and *tactics*. Lefebvre's concept of "appropriation" was an especially useful analytical tool to better understand how street art potentially operates as a socially impacting form of urban inscription. In the context of contemporary society, Lefebvre argues that space is utilized as a tool of domination necessary to the very maintenance of capitalism through a "mystified spatiality" which obscures the political potential of space. Through abstract space, our social life becomes structured by a set of highly mediated social relations, and the political potential of space itself is severed through a series of prohibitions that become naturalized in public consciousness. Lefebvre uses the term "appropriation" to refer to the practice in which social actors modify abstract space to expand human possibilities. Given the centrality of public space in the practice of street art, I believe Lefebvre's conceptualization around the production of social space, and specifically the concepts of abstract space and appropriation, are functional analytical tools to describe how the practice of street art operates in social space.

de Certeau's work around the idea of the "tactic" was also useful in analyzing the work of Banksy as an example of how street art constitutes a "way of operating" in everyday life. In line with Lefebvre, de Certeau suggests that these ways of operating, which he terms "tactics", "constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production" (1980, p. 66). Tactics are actions in the space of the other; they capitalize on the moment, and are not stable, due to their reliance on time and

opportunity, they are not permanent. Given the ephemerality of urban inscription and street art more specifically, as well the instability of meaning that seems inherent in its form – as will be discussed later – de Certeau's work serves as a productive theoretical lens to explore the multidimensional nature of street art. However, as it will be seen, de Certeau's work does not entirely translate in describing Banksy's work given Banksy's status as a maverick artist; in this way, Banksy problematizes traditional conceptions around the street artist and the street art world.

Banksy: Flag bearer of the contemporary street art scene

Considered one of the seminal artists – if not the primary artist – at the forefront of the contemporary street art movement, the British street artist Banksy has gained a reputation for creating politically charged and often satirical art works illegally in the public space. His work has sparked widespread attention among the public, generating divisive opinions and debates on his art and the street art phenomenon more generally among policymakers, the public, and the art world alike, evidencing that his work serves as an interesting example of the intersections between art, politics, and commerce present in street art. More specifically, the discussion of Banksy's work among the stakeholders in the established art world – and its inclusion in the institutionalized spaces of the museum and private collections of the moneyed elite – point to the increasing closeness between the illegal art of the streets and the guarded art of the gallery as first made apparent by artists such as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. As one writer noted, "Banksy works at incredible extremes...[h]e is a counter-cultural prankster, but has art in major cosmopolitan galleries around the globe" (Web Urbanist, 2007, para.1).

Banksy, like many street and graffiti artists, operates anonymously, adopting "Banksy" as his pseudonym. His origins and background are largely unknown, as he has closely guarded his

identity, ostensibly for legal reasons, given that his work involves the unsanctioned use of public space. His elusiveness undoubtedly contributes to the interest around his character; he has been dubbed “the world’s most infamous street artist” (Web Urbanist, 2007, 2008), and though many claims have been made regarding his identity, none have been authenticated as definitive.

Despite this mystery, it is widely accepted that Banksy was born in the early 1970s in Bristol, England, and became active in the Bristol graffiti scene in the early nineties, a product of the local underground cultural scene, which also saw the rise of famous musical groups such as Portishead and Massive Attack (Baker, 2008). In one of the few interviews granted by Banksy in 2006, he recalls his initiation into Bristol’s graffiti scene:

When I was about 10 years old, a kid called 3D was painting the streets hard. I think he'd been to New York and was the first to bring spray painting back to Bristol. I grew up seeing spray paint on the streets way before I ever saw it in a magazine or on a computer...Graffiti was the thing we all loved at school. We did it on the bus on the way home from school.

Everyone was doing it. (as cited by Adams, 2009, para. 6).

Banksy began his work as a graffiti artist as a young teen, later operating as part of Bristol’s DryBreadZ graffiti group (Adams, 2009). Describing his initial motivation for throwing up graffiti tags, he says, “You’re 14, 15. It’s a big world out there, you wanna make your mark, and no one listens to a word you say. Whereas, yer know, one night, one spray can, all of a sudden people notice you” (as cited by Francis, 2010, para. 10). His initiation into the graffiti thus reflects the findings of many sociological studies of the graffiti world that describe graffiti as a form of urban inscription that provides the disenfranchised and marginalized an opportunity to make their mark and inscribe their identity on the public space that alienates them (Castleman, 1982; Lachmann, 1988).

Banksy did not develop his distinctive stenciling style until the late nineties, claiming he discovered it while hiding under a truck from anti-graffiti authorities during a paint session, noticing a stenciled serial number on the truck's fuel tank (Banksy, 2005). Noting that it would greatly expedite the painting process (something he admitted that he was not efficient at) thus helping him evade the authorities, he began using stencils, and this developed into his signature style (Banksy, 2005). Though stenciled pieces are Banksy's *modus operandi*, he is also known to create sculptural pieces (Appendix, Figure 3), which are left conspicuously in various city spaces, and to also initiate performance based urban interventions, both in open public spaces and within the confines of "closed" spaces such as museums – one example of such an intervention is *Peckham Rock*, a fragment of concrete depicting a crudely drawn Neanderthal figure pushing a shopping cart, which was surreptitiously affixed to the walls of the British Museum in May 2005, intended to masquerade as an actual artifact in the Museum's collection (Appendix, Figure 4) (Dickens, 2008). Completing the performative component of this piece, Banksy uploaded a videotape of the installation of *Peckham Rock* to his website, which was widely distributed to the public, suggesting that these acts of "art terrorism" function in a manner akin to performance art.

Banksy's work mostly consists of stenciled images on public surfaces such as walls and streets that often feature striking imagery occasionally accompanied by textual epigrams and slogans. Typically satirical, his work combines dark humour with political commentary – many of his works draw on either an anti-war, anti-establishment, or anti-capitalist theme – his works have been considered by some as an "art that speaks directly to the masses", simultaneously entertaining and thought-provoking (Chaundy, 2006, para. 11). His style of urban inscription is strikingly iconographic, and his works often engage in a sort of visual dialogue with our cities,

playing with the forgotten interstices of public spaces: a “WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?” stenciled in front of a CCTV surveillance camera, a masked rat stenciled to appear as if cutting a padlocked box, an image of a maid sweeping dust under the whitewashed “curtain” to an unpainted patch of brick wall are a few examples of this. Banksy’s work thus is exemplar of the contemporary street art movement, which actively attempts to engage with “urban audiences through ‘readable’ iconographic inscriptions’...in order to challenge their visual understandings and appreciations of the city” (Dickens, 2008, p. 474).

Banksy has made his disdain for the established art world quite evident in works that specifically target bastions of high arts and culture. In London, he has spray painted “boring” in bright red paint onto the side of the National Film Theatre and has scrawled “Mind the Crap” onto the steps of the Tate Modern immediately prior to the awarding of the prestigious Turner Prize. Such works point to a key theme in Banksy’s work, a critique of the perceived elitist environment of the institutionalized art world. Many of Banksy’s works with this theme rework canonical art established within the elite art world; for example, he has recreated a sculpture of Rodin’s *The Thinker* in a London street; Banksy’s version, titled *The Drinker*, is a similarly sculpted male figure kneeling pensively on a concrete plinth, with the significant distinction between the two being that *The Drinker* has a traffic cone on its head (Appendix, Figure 5). Banksy has also created revisionist oil paintings, famously recreating Monet’s work, *Water Lilies* with urban detritus littering the pond, thereby disrupting the idyllic serenity of the scene. In this way, Banksy very consciously inserts himself into the historical artistic lineage of established artists to critique the world of institutionalized art and to more broadly challenge the “antipathy towards corporate branding and creeping globalization” (Manco as cited by Dickens, 2008, p. 474). As evidenced by his own idea of “brandalism” – a conflation of the words “vandalism” and

“brand”, Banksy uses this neologism to describe the defacement of public space by corporate imagery – the ideological position espoused by Banksy through many of his art works can be traced back to the broader history of avant-garde art movements, such as the political artistic practices of the Situationists and more recently, activist art and culture jamming (Dickens, 2008). Banksy’s works can thus be seen to draw on existing artistic traditions around “found art” and more specifically, the 1990s British style of “agitprop art” (Dickens, 2008). As Cynthia Rose explains, the myriad visual symbols, slogans, and branded imagery that proliferated in the city became the “raw material” for Agitprop artists, whose tendency towards appropriation and intervention embodied a “reaction to surreal circumstance – but a reaction which seeks to assert morality” (as cited by Dickens, 2008, p. 474).

Despite this antagonistic attitude towards the art establishment, Banksy has increasingly aligned himself with the production, distribution, and organization practices of the elite art world. One such example of this is Banksy’s use of a studio space to produce his work, an increasingly common practice among the street art community (Dickens, 2008). This decision ensures that the artist is more prepared when placing his work on the streets – allowing the production of more complex, higher quality stencils that require less time to produce on the streets and therefore reduce the risk of being evaded by the authorities in the process (Dickens, 2008). However, as Alison Bain suggests, securing a separate studio space “is not only a basic requirement of artistic practice but also a valuable reinforcement of an artistic identity...to invest in a studio signifies a commitment to the fine art profession and a validation of the decision to be an artist” (as cited by Dickens, 2008, p. 480). As evidenced by his documentary film *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, his studio is staffed by a small team of assistants who help him create and display his works, thus evoking the traditions established by Renaissance era artists who worked

with apprentices to create their works (Collins, 2007). Furthermore, Banksy also works with an agent – a common practice of artists working within the conventional art world – who is authorized to act on his behalf to authenticate his legal print and art works and act as the point of sale for his work; as well as publicists, who issue releases regarding his work and exhibitions generating additional publicity for the artist (Collins, 2007).

Furthermore, while the majority of Banksy's works are displayed on the surfaces and streets of the city, he has also organized a number of exhibitions in sites aligning more closely with the spaces of the elite art world – though until 2009, he claimed that he did not personally participate in any of the exhibitions featuring his work at “proper art galleries”, eschewing such established institutions and preferring to display his art in unconventional spaces. Banksy's first North American exhibition debuted in 2002 in the small 33 1/3 Gallery in Los Angeles. Titled *Existencilism*, the show was Banksy's first foray into the American art scene, and though small, his following exhibitions only grew larger: in 2006, he held his first large-scale art show, *Barely Legal*, billed as a “vandalized warehouse extravaganza” in a warehouse in downtown industrial L.A., the centerpiece which was quite literally an “elephant in a room” (Bowes, 2006; Collins, 2007). Later, in 2009, Banksy collaborated on the first ever exhibition officially sanctioned by the artist himself, taking over the Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery with the show *Banksy versus Bristol Museum*, which has been the largest showcase of his work to date – featuring more than 100 of Banksy's pieces seen over 300,000 times during the course of 12 weeks (Cafe, 2009).

Banksy's skyrocketing popularity among the general public and the art elite has consequently created a competitive market for his works, transforming his street art into a popular commodity. Though Banksy does not directly sell his work through auction houses such

as Sotheby's¹, his previous agent, Steve Lazarides, has acted as an authenticator of Banksy works, thus tacitly endorsing the sale of his works through this elite secondary market (Collins, 2007). Despite Banksy's unequivocal criticisms of the established art world, overall, the art establishment has enthusiastically embraced his genre of art, and collectors have been keen to obtain his work, often at high prices – noted figures in the conventional art world, such as Charles Saatchi and Damien Hirst, are among those avid collectors of his work. As London-based art dealer Acoris Adipa states, "[f]rom the very beginning I got involved because of the aesthetic - he is just brilliant, I think he's a genius. Good contemporary art is all about how well artists reflect our society and I think Banksy is like a present day Punch magazine." (as cited by Brown, 2008, para. 3). As a result of the widespread popularity he has achieved among the art elite, Banksy's works have sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars through art shows and auctions, firmly financially differentiating him from the stereotyped disenfranchised and economically disadvantaged street artist – Lazarides has estimated that his works sell for an average of £10,000 a piece (Hatterstone, 2004). Most recently in 2012, work that exhibited at his first L.A. show, *Existencilism*, acquired by art auction house Bonhams fetched up to £87,650 (Bonhams, 2012).

In recognition of the fact that it was becoming increasingly inaccessible for his expanding fan base to personally possess a Banksy piece – in 2002, Banksy and his then-agent Steve Lazarides established a company, Pictures on Walls Limited (POW), whose primary aim was to produce limited edition screen-printed reproductions of street art. As the POW website explains:

¹ While Banksy does not sell any of his public work through auction houses, there have been cases in which the property owners where his work has been placed have attempted to sell his work, often leaving the problem of removal up to the winning bidder. Banksy does, however, sell his more conventional canvas and sculpture work through independently-organized exhibitions.

POW was founded by a loose collection of alcoholics and show-offs that felt they were too underground (meaning not good enough) to be embraced by the proper art world.

They set up their own production facility in an East London shit-hole from where prints could be produced and sold direct over the internet without the usual art world sham, snobbery, and mark-up (as cited by Dickens, 2010, p. 64).

Thus, POW was formed to create an accessible means for fans of Banksy's work to acquire a piece of Banksy culture – to participate and trade on a material, collector's level. As POW's office manager, Steph, suggests, "[s]creen prints have become a way for people who want access to that scene to buy into it" (as cited by Dickens, 2010, p. 65). POW tightly controls production and distribution of street art prints by various street and underground artists, only one of whom is Banksy. Only 200 copies of each screen print are created, each which are hand embossed with POW's logo and numbered individually to signify which copy out of 200 the purchaser possessed (Dickens, 2010). Prices are managed (typically from £100 – £500) to try to ensure that prints remain obtainable to the public and that the company's pricing practices are consistent with their belief that accessibility to art should not be dictated by financial or social status. Obviously, such an agenda renders the traditional profit-driven impetus of most companies unstable and POW has had to consciously maintain a balance between price, quality, and quantity of print run in order to remain consistent with their company's vision of bringing art to the masses (Dickens, 2010). Yet as Dickens (2010) points out, the company's objective of providing affordable, accessible art also fed into the dominant anti-establishment discourse that the company, its products and its primary audience drew from, thus helping to build and maintain POW's integrity and appeal as a brand. This can more broadly be interpreted as in line with Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the "disavowal of the economy" characteristic of the art

establishment that is, a “refusal of the commercial which is in fact a collective disavowal of commercial interests and profits, the most ‘anti-economic’ and most visibly ‘disinterested’ behaviours...contain a form of economic rationality” (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 75). In this way we can understand POW’s vision and pricing strategy as a conscious strategy for managing their market.

Despite POW’s best intentions, the demand for prints has far outstripped supply, leading to the emergence of a secondary market on the online auctioning site, eBay, where sold out POW prints are often priced at huge mark-ups and sold to the highest bidder (Dickens, 2010). Dickens argues that the simultaneous development of POW and eBay has created conditions ripe for the rise of the “street art collector”, a “superconsumer with significant personal and financial investment in the [street art] scene” (2010, p. 73). Rather than interpreting this as evidence of an exploitative commodification of the street art scene akin to the cooptation of graffiti in 1980s New York, however, Dickens (2010) suggests that POW serves as an example of how street art appears more closely linked to both the established art world and commerce. The constant balancing of entrepreneurialism, commitment to accessible art, and the practical considerations associated with such a vision thus indicate the “highly negotiated nature of these everyday engagements with the contradictions of capitalism and its adaptability to subversive cultural forms” (Dickens, 2010, p. 78). In this way, POW can be understood as a more democratic approach to materially experience an art scene outside of the traditional art system of dealers, galleries, and auction houses.

The phenomenal rise of Banksy – and the increasing incorporation of his work in the collections of members of the art establishment – have unsurprisingly led some critics to suggest that the movement of his work from the streets to the gallery has rendered his work toothless, lacking the original energy and playfulness it possessed in the public, its political commentary

diffused by the virtue of the artist participating in the very system his art is perceived to challenge. As Tim Adams, writing in *The Guardian* regarding the opening of Banksy's summer 2009 Bristol exhibition, stated: "the show was clearly a sell-out, in every sense" (2009, para. 3). He continued, adding:

Confined to a gallery, this energy looks very flat indeed. There might be some shock value in confronting a classical statue with an upturned pot of pink paint on its head in the street, but not one staged in a museum. Likewise, an old master daubed with the words: "Exit through the gift shop" could hardly make its point with a broader brush. And you search in vain among the exhibits for any proper sense of the artist himself. (Adams, 2009, para. 19).

Some of these critics decry Banksy's methods, claiming that his anonymity only contributes to this branding, some labelling it as marketing spin (Gavin, 2008) and pointing to the considerable wealth he has generated through his work, thus firmly placing him on the commerce side of the art/commerce binary.

Yet such criticisms of "selling out" easily fall into the trap of dichotomizing art and commerce, abstractly rendering the two spheres of collective human activity as wholly isolated without any significant grounding in real artistic practice. Indeed, Banksy's work seems to reflexively insert itself within this dichotomy, simultaneously enforcing it while breaking it down, thus critically problematizing any simplistic notion of his art as emblematic of one side of this binary. Indeed, as Louisa Buck, British art critic and judge for the 2005 Turner Prize argued: "Banksy needs the art establishment in an inverted way, because if it didn't exist, he wouldn't have something not to care about; like a naughty boy who needs a parent to rebel against. But he's a genuine artist who *lives in the real world*" (as cited by Chaundy, 2006, para. 16, emphasis

added). Indeed, despite Banksy's vehement opposition to corporate branding, he has become one in the process, and it seems that Banksy is conscious of this critical tension given his concept of "brandalism". Though originally used to describe the defacement of public space by the proliferation of advertising and marketing fuelled imagery, this concept can be easily used to describe his own work – despite its approval in the art world, the majority of Banksy's pieces are placed and displayed in the public space illegally and thus are still considered vandalism.

For supporters of street art, Banksy's increasing popularity – and the ensuing critical questions it has raised about the relationships between art, commerce, and politics – has led to what they have labeled the "Banksy effect" (Wooster Collective, 2007), envisioned as a reimagining of the possibilities for not only art produced on the streets, but art more generally. Significantly, for street artists, Banksy and his agent Steve Lazarides have created a market for a genre of art that previously was largely cast-off as the work of idle rebellious youths, and have opened the possibility of making a living from an art form that was once solely seen as a symptom of urban disorder. But individuals espousing the power of the Banksy effect have also suggested that the growing appreciation of his work has spawned the possibility of not only seeing art in a new way, but in accepting art as a part of our everyday lives, outside of the closed, whitewashed walls of the museum or art gallery (Wooster Collective, 2007).

Evidently, there is an interplay of critical tensions between art, politics, and commerce that intersect within not only Banksy's work but also the trajectory of his career. The suggestion that Banksy's increasing popularity effectively antagonizes the dominant thread of antiestablishment and critical political commentary in his work is at its best simplistic, and this is exemplified by the multitudes of opinions and the varied reception to his work among not only the public, but the art world more specifically. In what follows, my project will engage in a

visual and textual analysis of *Wall and Piece* in order to examine in-depth how such critical tensions are articulated through his work, and how such negotiations are publicly communicated in the realm of visual and textual discourse as a moment of encounter in which his works acquire additional layers of meaning.

Visual and textual discourse analysis: *Wall and Piece*

Wall and Piece (2005), published by Random House, is Banksy's first mass produced book and as such is the first of his books to be made readily available to the general public – having sold 250,000 copies as of May 2007 (Collins, 2007). At 192 pages, it primarily consists of selected photographs of his work, divided into six broad sections: monkeys, cops, rats, cows, art, and street furniture. Some images in the book are accompanied by textual descriptions, anecdotes, and quotes. Though some of these textual accompaniments are directly related to the image on which they are superimposed or juxtaposed against (referring to the production or subject/content of the piece in particular), many of them do not explicitly link to the image itself. As van Leeuwen and Jewitt suggest, analytical consideration to both words and images are important when both are present within the particular subject of analysis, in this way, the verbal information often serves “to anchor who or what is depicted or what is symbolized” (2001, p.7). Yet in many cases in which image is coupled with text in *Wall and Piece* there is a lack of cohesion between the picture and the words accompanying it and therefore a “gap” in continuity between the image and text. I would like to suggest that this “gap” is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, I would argue that it places more of the interpretive work on the reader. Rather than accompanying these images with a textual summary directly related to the subject, Banksy encourages a more complex reading of his work – readers are left to reconcile the disconnect how they see fit. In this way, we can read the presence of this gap as a manifestation of the

democratic appeal of unsanctioned street art and graffiti on the whole, an opportunity for individuals to read Banksy's work how they may in lieu of any explicit direction guiding how a reader should receive a work. On the other hand, I would also suggest that this disconnect implies that the purpose of this book is to not only serve as a visual catalogue of Banksy's work, but as a book about the street art phenomenon, as the discursive themes evident in this book reflect the themes dominant in street art more generally.

I have chosen to focus on four selections from *Wall and Piece* in the analysis undertaken here: the "introductory" section on pages 8-9; pages 22-23; "Broken Window Theory" on pages 130-131; and "Crimewatch UK" on pages 169-172. Due to the presence of the two communicative mediums of image and text used in *Wall and Piece*, I have elected to blend visual and verbal analysis together for each selection, with various weight put on each type of analysis based on its significance in the selection. However, at the explanatory level, I have drawn on the entire book as I felt the contextual explanations for each selection interweave together and would benefit from a broader analysis thus allowing for a fuller realization of the discursive entanglements evident in this book, Banksy's work, and street art overall.

Wall and Piece: "Introduction" (pages 8-9)

Though *Wall and Piece* does not explicitly outline a broad structure in terms of text as it does for visuals (breaking down the visuals included in the book in sections through a table of contents), this section essentially functions as the introduction to the book as it "opens" the debate that is presented in the book and "sets the stage" (Appendix, Figure 6). Moreover, the image presented in this section is not art-focused like the majority of the book is, but rather depicts someone in the act of stenciling, a differentiation that supports the functioning of this

section as an introduction, “in the process” of creating the art depicted on these pages. The two pages that make up this introduction are visually dominated by a dimly lit photograph of a human figure, presumably male based on the manner of dress. There are no defining characteristics apparent in this image that suggest who the artist depicted is. However, based on the stencil he is using, the man can arguably be identified as Banksy as there are several examples of similar work attributed to Banksy in *Wall and Piece* (e.g., pages 70-73). The photograph depicts the subject mid-action stenciling a piece of street art onto the wall, his hand poised above the stencil. The action is primarily found on the right side of the image, which is brightly lit, and the text is found in a single column broken into several paragraphs on the left side, which due to the lack of lighting, is dominated by black.

Given the usually illegal nature of street art, and the therefore clandestine operations of its practitioners, the lighting of this image seems peculiar. Based on ethnographic accounts of how graffiti writers typically operate (Gauthier, 1998), it would be a reasonable assumption that street artists seek isolated, hard to reach areas for their work in order to escape detection from authorities. Given the lighting of this scene, the typically clandestine act of producing graffiti is rendered conspicuous, thus suggesting its staging. I would suggest that this could be read as an “opening” of the street art process and functions to signify the “uncovering” of the processes and ideological motivations involved in participating in such a contentious form of urban expression.

The text in this section is outlined in seven paragraphs. In terms of narrative style, the text in the introduction largely relies on a colloquial style of address, as evidenced by the introductory sentence: “I’m going to speak my mind, so this won’t take very long” (Banksy, 2005, p. 8). Thus, the text in this section draws on a conversational genre, which has a personalizing effect on the content, humanizing the author. At the same time, the text reads like a

defense; it is set up as a dichotomy with the extensive use of words and phrases such as ‘they’ and ‘the people’ therefore creating a group aligned with the author, ‘us’. The ‘they’ that Banksy refers to is initially unknown, though later it is defined as “the people who run our cities” and “politicians, advertising executives and *graffiti writers*” (2005, p. 8, emphasis added). The inclusion of ‘graffiti writers’ when defining ‘them’ is particularly interesting as earlier in this section, Banksy refers to the ‘you’ (and thus the group aligned with the author, ‘us’) implicitly as a *potential* graffiti writer, in the sentence in which he suggests “[a] wall has always been the best place to publish *your* work” (2005, p.8, emphasis added). In this way, the ‘us’, ‘you’, and ‘them’ do not have a stable referencing function within the text. While the ‘they’ referred to in the text is defined, Banksy makes no attempt to further lexicalize ‘us’ beyond ‘graffiti writers’ and ‘vandals’, the only two instances where the use of the personal pronoun ‘us’ is defined. It is particularly interesting that Banksy chooses to define ‘us’ dichotomously, as ‘graffiti writers’ is a more neutral term and does not carry the negative connotations that ‘vandals’ does. In this way, I would suggest that the lexicalization of ‘us’ in the introduction incurs the reader to approach the street art debate – and the characterization of its practitioners – ambiguously.

On a more subtle level, the ambivalence around the relationship between the text and the addressee is important as it seems to suggest a degree of ambiguity and possibility around the alignment of the reader (who, depending on the reading, can be considered as part of either ‘us’ or ‘them’), plausibly alluding to the complexity of the wider debate on street art. At the same time, this ambiguity also implicitly critiques not only the efforts of the authorities – who believe that graffiti is dangerous – but also the graffiti writers: “[t]hey say graffiti frightens people and is symbolic of the decline in society, but graffiti is only dangerous in the minds of three types of people; politicians, advertising executives, and graffiti writers” (Banksy, 2005, p. 8). In this

sense, Banksy seems to trivialize the efforts of both parties involved in this contentious debate on the presence of graffiti in our cities.

This text strongly draws on an anti-establishment, anti-capitalist discourse in complex and ambiguous ways. The “us versus them” dichotomy is reinforced throughout, defining “them” as the establishment who “run our cities” based on profit have failed to understand graffiti (2005, p. 8). Turning the tables, the author suggests that the true vandals in society are those who saturate the public space with corporate imagery “trying to make us feel inadequate unless we buy their stuff” (2005, p. 8). In particular, the passage, “[t]he people who run our cities don’t understand graffiti because they think nothing has the right to exist unless it makes a profit, which makes their opinion worthless” (2005, p. 8) is especially interesting when contextualized within the trajectory of Banksy’s career. Despite his dislike towards attempts to make street art profitable, since his rise, Banksy has profited handsomely from the sale of his works. With the realization of this the reading of this text undoubtedly becomes more problematic, and the entanglements between art, politics, and commerce, in street art begin to appear evident.

Revolution (pages 22-23)

Pages 22-23 of *Wall and Piece* depict an image of a popular Banksy stencil, which dominates the visual organization of this particular section (Appendix, Figure 7). The stencil depicts a young man painted entirely in black and white, whose face is shielded by a bandana. The concealment of the subject’s identity, combined with the militant manner in which he is standing suggest that this man is some sort of outlaw priming a well-aimed throw, perhaps at a storefront window. Yet the man is not carrying a projectile in his hand; he is depicted holding a colourful bouquet of flowers, the only trace of colour in the image. If we contextualize this

image with the introduction to *Wall and Piece*, we can interpret its meaning as a statement on the vilifying of the street artist in public discourse, where the street artist is often depicted as an angry, disengaged youth belligerently defacing the spaces of our cities. But the disconnect between what the man is perceived to be doing, and what *he is doing it with* in this image troubles this popular characterization of the street artist. Thus, the disconnect in the image seems to suggest harmlessness of street artists, further supported by intertextual evidence in the introduction, where Banksy states: “[s]ome people become vandals because they want to make the world a better *looking* place” (2005, p. 8).

The image is accompanied by text on the opposing page (23), set in two columns in six paragraphs. Here we see an example of the “gap” I alluded to earlier, as an initial reading of the text suggests no explicit link between text and image (i.e., the text does not function as a caption for the image, or speak to the image itself). Rather, the text is paraphrased from a BBC News story on the Romanian Revolution of 1989, and briefly tells the story of the events leading to the overthrow of President Ceausescu. Interestingly, the text follows a discourse schema atypical for a news story (thus suggesting that this is not excerpted, but paraphrased). Rather than beginning with event followed by circumstances, it begins with introduction/circumstances, continues with the description of the event, and concludes with the consequences of that event. As such, despite the fact that it states that it is sourced from BBC News, the text in this particular section does not solely draw from the news genre; I would suggest that it also draws upon the narrative genre, as it seems very anecdotal.

The text in this section gains another layer of meaning through intertextuality – its connections to the rest of *Wall and Piece*. With that realization, it is apparent that this story functions as a parable illustrating the potential power and impact of the actions of a solitary

individual, and within the context of the book, is meant to allude to the revolutionary potential of street art, with the street artists implied to be the lone revolutionaries. If this is taken into consideration, the impact the structural organization and lexicalization of the text in this selection has on reinforcing this thematic principle becomes evident. For example, structuring this text to begin with the circumstances of the event – rather than the description of the event itself – serves to contextualize the justifications for the revolution in a sequential manner. On a more specific level, this is enforced by the lexical choices used to describe Ceaucescu’s government – words such as ‘corrupt’, ‘brutal’, ‘infamous’, and ‘ferocious’. Interestingly, no adjectives are used to describe Leon, the man whose actions are suggested to catalyze the revolution (aside from ‘solitary’), nor the revolutionaries. Rather, the text depicts Leon reacting *to* circumstance; he was “sick to death with Ceausescu and the dreadful circumstances he created for everyone” and *as a result* began chanting in favour of the revolutionaries. This reflects the articulation of the circumstances presented in the introduction of this book, which reads, “*they started the fight* and the wall is the weapon of choice to hit them back” (Banksy, 2005, p. 8, emphasis added). As a result, the behavior of the revolutionaries – and the implied street artists – is textually justified due to the actions of their oppressors. The city is imagined as a symbolic arena of power struggle, a conflict between the ‘revolutionary’ street artists and the authoritarians, defined in the introduction as the political establishment and the corporate world, which is fought on the walls of the public space.

“Broken Window Theory” (sic.) (pages 130-131)

“Broken Window Theory” (sic.) is visually balanced; on one page (131), there is a photograph of a wall of a building (the caption notes the image was taken on Old St, London, in

2004), and the other contains text, titled “Broken Window Theory” (sic.) (Appendix, Figure 8). The image is focused on a piece of stenciled street art, which depicts a window, through which a television set is being thrown, shattering the painted-on glass on the wall. Below this piece of street art there is a fire extinguisher, as well as three slightly faded, monochromatic graffiti tags. The wall is grimy and the sidewalk is sparse, save some litter.

The opposing page contains text arranged in two columns, and titled “Broken Window Theory” (sic.). In content, the two columns serve as counterpoints to each other – the left column summarizes the Broken Windows Theory initially deliberated by Wilson and Kelling. It is predominantly written in encyclopedic genre and thus seems to serve an informative purpose, therefore implying an air of objectivity, though certain sections are quite colloquial, for example, “if a window in a building is smashed but not repaired people walking by will think no-one cares” (Banksy, 2005, p. 130). As such, this particular section of the text largely draws upon a discourse of authoritarianism arguing that street art and graffiti are inherently criminal as it signifies social disorder.

When considering the right column of text, another layer of meaning is mapped; this column contains a “Letter received to Banksy website”. The writer, Daniel, describes his discontent over the fact that he cannot afford to purchase a home in the Hackney borough of London where he grew up, and attributes partial blame to Banksy: “[y]our graffities are undoubtedly part of what makes these wankers think our area is cool” (Banksy, 2005, p. 130). The allusion to unaffordability and real estate, as well as the lexicalization and characterization of the incoming residents as “yuppies and students” thus draws upon a discourse of gentrification, in direct opposition to the thematic structure of the text in the left column, which emphasizes a discourse of authoritarianism and disorder. The thread linking the two sections is

the presence of street art in our cities, but they diverge in opinion in their discussion of its effects – therefore the juxtaposition of these two texts work against each other. In doing so, I would argue that Banksy refers to the greater debate about the worth of his art and the tensions between street art as crime and as high art enjoyed by the wealthy elite (the “yuppies” referred to in the letter).

With this realization, a further consideration of the relationship between the image and text is warranted. Together, the text of “Broken Window Theory” (sic.), and the presence of the stencil, along with the graffiti tags on this wall, might suggest a validation of Wilson and Kelling’s theorization. However, the text of the letter evidently problematizes such an understanding, as well as the externally (i.e., outside *Wall and Piece*) sourced knowledge that Banksy has been concurrently labeled as a vandal *and* as one of Britain’s most infamous artists. Thus, the tensions between characterizing street art as crime (as Wilson and Kelling, and civic policy makers who pursue zero-tolerance programs towards the eradication of graffiti, do) and street art as a high art are exacerbated with a layered, polysemous reading of this selection.

Art (pages 158 – 186)

The *Art* section in *Wall and Piece* spans several pages, which mostly consist of images of what Banksy describes as “Vandalised Paintings”, famed paintings incorporating revisions such as stenciled helicopters or additional objects. I have chosen to focus primarily on pages 169 – 172, four pages that center on a particular performance piece/installation that Banksy mounted on the wall of the Tate Gallery in London in 2003, as it provides a particularly productive example of the complex nature of Banksy’s particular brand of ‘art terrorism’. Pages 169 and 170 provide a close-up of the components of this ‘vandalised painting’ installation: a painting of

an idyllic country scene, which has been cordoned off by the addition of police incident tape, distinguishing the setting as a crime scene (Appendix, Figure 9). The opposing page (169), contains a textual description of this piece, which we learn is titled *Crimewatch UK has ruined the countryside for all of us*. Stylistically, the text is written to mimic the art historical genre, and follows the form of a textual summary accompanying an artwork in a museum, describing the art movement this piece belongs to, as well as the technique used (in which our suspicions that this is indeed a vandalized painting and the police tape was added by Banksy are confirmed), and the suggested interpretation of the piece, as well as the method of acquisition. The text directs the reading of *Crimewatch UK has ruined the countryside for all of us* as a comment that the obsession with crime and paedophilia has led to a paranoia-fuelled failure to appreciate beauty. The amplification of its claims thus serves to make evident the absurdity of Crimewatch UK's efforts. It is apparent when contextualizing this piece within *Wall and Piece* and the wider debate on street art that it can be read as a wider comment on the criminalization of graffiti and street art and the efforts of authorities to eradicate such forms of urban inscription from the spaces of our cities. As such, Banksy references the authoritarian discourse of criminality to suggest that this preoccupation with criminalization impedes the public's ability to enjoy our urban environments and the playfulness of street art.

The following two pages (171-172) depict a series of photographs in the Tate Gallery (Appendix, Figure 10). The first photograph is enlarged to encompass the entire page; in the foreground of this image is a man, dressed in black, sitting on a chair, while patrons explore the gallery behind him. Judging by his clothing – one can make out a “Ta” emblem on his jacket that presumably stands for ‘Tate’ – this individual is a museum guard. On the opposing page, there are six frames taken in sequence. These images depict an unidentified individual entering the

gallery, pulling out a painting from his shopping bag, and pasting it on the gallery wall. The final frame of this sequence of images is a zoomed-in image of the painting placed on the wall, an image necessary to evidence the success of the intervention; it is *Crimewatch UK has ruined the countryside for all of us*. Evidently, this performative intervention was meant as a mockery of the museum guards, those charged with protecting the sanctity of the works within its walls and enforcing acceptable encounters between patrons and the art; this is a theme frequently touched upon in many of Banksy's other works. As Dickens (2008) points out, these intervention-performances that Banksy undertakes in museums also implicitly poke fun at the inability of museum patrons to identify fakes; *Crimewatch UK has ruined the countryside for all of us* was only detected 2 ½ hours following its installation because it crashed to the floor due to poorly adhering tape, as noted in the caption below the images. When contextualizing this aspect of the intervention with one of the key components of the performance, the textual caption accompanying the painting, it becomes evident that this work can also be read that the appreciation for art history and high culture is often arbitrary, uncritical, and detached from the subjective realm of personal aesthetic experience. As such, the layers of caption, designation, and action contribute to the meaning of *Crimewatch UK* as both art and intervention.

An additional layer of meaning is discerned in examining the superimposed text on page 171. Organized in two paragraphs, this text indicts the art establishment, and seems to outline the justifications for undertaking the performative intervention documented on these pages. Banksy makes an appeal to populist art and culture, drawing on a democratic discourse critiquing the exclusive and inaccessible nature of high art, here lexicalized as 'Art' (versus 'art'). By describing the production of popular 'art' as driven by the impetus of 'the people' – the general public – Banksy sets up a dichotomy, resulting in the assumption that 'Art' does not follow the

will of the people, which is confirmed when he says, “[t]he Art we look at is made by only a select few” (Banksy, 2008, p. 171). The lexical choice of “made” is interesting, as it denotes the process of production, but the following sentence elucidates this choice further, clarifying that ‘made’ refers to the entire production, distribution, and exhibition process. In doing so, Banksy sheds light on the arbitrary, oligarchical nature of the art establishment, but tempering this interpretation is the awareness that Banksy’s own popularity among the public and elite art world has undoubtedly been bolstered by the attentions of the select few (who wield power in the art world) he critiques within this text. Indeed, on the following page, Banksy recalls a time in his childhood when his sister justified throwing his paintings away, saying “[w]ell it’s not like they’re ever gonna be hanging in the Louvre is it?” (Banksy, 2008, p. 173), making apparent this contradiction.

Social analysis: Street art as process

Clearly there are a number of discursive entanglements in *Wall and Piece*, resulting in layers upon layers of meaning, which in combination render any reading of Banksy’s work, particularly in the context of his path to fame, complex. How then do we make sense of the intersections between art, politics, and commerce as they come to be configured through Banksy’s form of urban inscription, and what might this suggest of street art culture and the practices of its practitioners as a whole? In what follows, I will attempt to work through the diverging discursive patterns evident in Banksy’s works, as well as his strategies of artistic practice and promotion, and the critical reception to his work, to suggest the productivity in conceptualizing street art, and street art culture, as a practice situated between art, politics, and commerce – encounters with different realms of collective activity – in which each realm inscribes additional meanings and discursive themes to the artwork. I particularly focus on two

thematic strands, firstly analyzing how street art exemplifies ideas regarding the reclamation of public space. In this vein, Michel de Certeau's conceptualization of the "tactic" is particularly useful to describe how we can understand the tensions inherent in street art as the movement of the tactic through its shifting relationship to its production, distribution, and reception as these particular contexts come to bear on the art itself. However, I problematize such characterizations of street art as a political spatial practice by suggesting the multifarious ways in which Banksy both exemplifies and confounds certain characteristics typical of an established artist working within the confines of an elite art world.

In this respect, my approach is similar to Dickens' (2008), who exemplifies the utility of adapting the methodological device of 'the journey' in order to trace the connections between spaces and particular configurations of social relations that Banksy's *Peckham Rock* moves through as "its life as an artwork unfolds" (2008, p. 471). Such a reconceptualization emphasizes the need to look beyond prevalent characterizations of street art that are grounded in understanding this cultural and artistic form as objects bound by spatial fixity and defined by dichotomies, towards a model of understanding that is based in the multilayered process of the generation of meaning, particularly in the case of a cultural form subject to so much contention. In doing so, I would suggest that the evident overlapping of these themes in Banksy's works gesture towards the growing closeness and consequent ambiguity between art, politics, and commerce in street art as an emerging form of urban inscription.

It is evident throughout *Wall and Piece*, and Banksy's work in general, that at a most basic level, his work visualizes the space of the city as a symbolic arena of power struggle:

The people who truly deface our neighbourhoods are the companies that scrawl giant slogans across buildings and buses trying to make us feel inadequate unless we buy their

stuff. They expect to be able to shout their message in your face from every available surface but you're never allowed to answer back. Well, they started the fight and the wall is the weapon of choice to hit them back. (Banksy, 2005, p. 8).

This is a central theme running through street art culture as a whole, as Schacter (2008), in his study of London-based street artists points out, many street artists feel their work is an "overt tactic to *reclaim* parts of the city, to *regain* possession of the metropolis which they believed had been sequestered from them by big business and private property" (p. 50). As such, the practice of street art and urban inscription allows them to, as Banksy puts it, "hit them back" and provoke new approaches to engaging with the city and accessing urban life.

This idea of the reclamation of the spaces of our everyday lives that is manifest in both Banksy's work and street art culture more generally can be further understood in the context of Henri Lefebvre's conceptualization around the production of social space. Lefebvre (1991) suggests that our understanding of space should not be relegated as "a detached enigma severed from our daily experience" (Schacter, 2008, p. 50), but should be fundamentally considered as manifest of the social relations that structures it – and it in turn structures. In the context of contemporary capitalism, Lefebvre reasoned that space becomes harnessed as a tool of domination necessary to the very maintenance of capitalism itself through a "mystified spatiality" which obscures the political nature of space by ideology and illusion. Through abstract space, social life becomes structured by a set of highly mediated social relations, and space itself becomes detached from its political potential through a series of prohibitions that become naturalized in the public consciousness (e.g., abolishment of graffiti), thereby limiting any potential for social action (Lefebvre, 1991; Merrifield, 2006). Not all hope is lost, however; Lefebvre (1991) suggests that even in the face of the mystified spatiality of abstract space,

individuals can exercise their agency to access and modify already existing space to expand the realm of possibility; he terms this form of agency “appropriation”. In this sense we can understand Banksy’s work as an attempt to reclaim the spaces that have been sequestered from the public and defaced by corporate imagery. This is best encapsulated in Banksy’s term ‘brandalism’, which he describes as: “[m]odern street art is a product of a generation tired of growing up with a relentless barrage of logos and images being thrown at their head everyday, and much of it is an attempt to pick up these visual rocks and throw them back” (Banksy, 2006, para. 9).

In his seminal book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau affirmed a need to refocus critical investigations of “the ways in which users – commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules – operate” in the course of their everyday lives (1980, p. 64). Similar to Lefebvre, de Certeau (1980) conceptualizes the space of the city as a space dominated by “strategies” of the powerful, defined as the institutional processes that determine norms and convention. Strategies are grounded in space and transcendent of time, which effectively renders their conventions finite and conclusive. For de Certeau, the potential for agency in such a network of strategy is best encapsulated in his idea of the “tactic”, an action that does *not* rely on a stable spatial or institutional localization, but rather capitalizes on the space of the other, capitalizing on opportunities that “must be seized ‘on the wing’” (1980, p. 70). In this sense, we can understand street art, especially on the basis of its most fundamental theme of recapturing the spaces of the city, as a particular iteration of de Certeau’s conceptualization of tactic. Importantly, de Certeau (1980) suggests that tactics are fundamentally temporal, implying their evolution through space and time and shifting social, material, and political contexts. In this

sense, the critical tensions intersecting through street art practice through different configurations of social relations can be understood as fluctuating dimensions of the tactic.

A microcosm of the anti-capitalist, anti-establishment theme running through street art and explicit in Banksy's work, is the rejection of the elite art world. For street artists such as Banksy, the art establishment comes to represent the epitome of undemocratic, elitist culture, which he describes as the "rest home for the overprivileged, the pretentious, and the weak" (Collins, 2007, para. 6). This unfettered criticism of the elite art world can be traced back through the history of critical avant-garde art and political movements, such as Dadaism, Surrealism, and perhaps most comparably, Situationism. Premising their critique on the art establishment on their greater appraisal of the capitalist "society of the spectacle", which Guy Debord (1967) and the Situationists suggested culminated in the mass dissemination of a culture of "an immense accumulation of spectacles", in which everything directly experienced becomes reduced to a *representation* of reality. These spectacles, through their perpetuation, produced a false consciousness in the public, alienating the people from direct engagement with social life (1967, para. 1). The Situationists adopted a combative stance aimed to reverse this alienation and the associated relations it fostered between the public and the immediacy of their social surroundings through the device of "détournement", a strategy involving the redeployment and recombination of existing symbols and signs through actions or activities that would subvert the established order (Debord, 1967). Evidently, the strategy of *détournement*, parallels the strategy of appropriation discussed by Lefebvre, as it involves the recuperation of already existing signs, materials, and spaces, to confront society itself; as well as the concept of tactic expounded by de Certeau, who suggests that the tactic arises in the moments of the combination of heterogeneous elements (1980). It is a "subversive plagiarism that diverts the spectacle's language and imagery

from its intended use” to engage citizens to think critically of the conditions of their social existence (Downing, 2001, p. 59).

In this way we can further interpret the discursive themes of anti-art and anti-establishment running through Banksy’s works as a contemporary manifestation of the historically evident discontents directed towards the elitist, undemocratic nature of the established art world and society more broadly. The continuation of this theme is apparent in Banksy’s performance-interventions in museums and discussions of his work; as he suggests in *Wall and Piece*, “[w]hen you go to an Art gallery you are simply a tourist looking at the trophy cabinet of a few millionaires” (2008, p. 171). The installation of *Crimewatch UK has ruined the countryside for all of us* – as well as his other performance-intervention pieces – in the institutionalized spaces of the art establishment thus map contextual meaning onto his work, as the works operate to recover these spaces from the private to the public. As Dickens (2008) points out, Banksy takes up his cause – a critical indictment of commercial, capitalist society, and the art world – by “producing work that directly interferes with the politics of representation within these sanctified spaces of high-culture” (p. 476).

Indeed, the strategies of détournement and appropriation are seen throughout Banksy’s work, both on and off the streets. As mentioned previously, Banksy continues the traditions of found art as exemplified by the agit-prop movement in the UK. His work largely draws on the imagery of the everyday, co-opting images such as the McDonald’s logo, the Queen, or Andy Warhol’s famed Campbell’s soup can. This technique of repurposing is also extended to Banksy’s use of materials for his work, as exemplified by *Crimewatch UK* in which he purchased a painting from a market and stenciled on it to generate a new piece and new meanings around the work; or in *Peckham Rock* in which he obtained a fragment of concrete

from a rubbish pile to serve as a canvas. In outlining the utility of détournement in generating alternative meaning contrary to the society of the spectacle, Debord and Wolman suggest:

Any elements, no matter where they are taken from, can serve in making new combinations...no matter how far apart their original contexts may be, a relationship is always formed...*The mutual interference of two worlds of feeling, or the bringing together of two independent expressions, supercedes the original elements and produces a synthetic organization of greater efficacy. Anything can be used.* (Debord & Wolman, 1956, p. 9, emphasis added)

Banksy's conscious utilization of popular imagery and strategy in subversive ways thus allows for the production of new meanings in order to undermine, or at the very least complicate, our naturalized understandings of the status quo. This is particularly evident in the 'Art' section of *Wall and Piece*, in which Banksy adopts the dominant imagery of the art establishment to divert the spectacle of art and in doing so, brings attention to the artifice of the elite art world. Debord and Wolman suggest the "interference of two worlds of feeling, or the bringing together of two independent expressions" leads to the generation of synthetic meaning that overcomes its constituent parts (1957, p. 9). I would suggest that Banksy's work, by combining contradictory elements in unusual situations and contexts, sheds light on the increasing closeness and interrelatedness of the realms of art, politics, and commerce as they come to be configured through the practice of street art.

The symbolic subversion evident in Banksy's work often incorporates dark humour and satire, and in this sense reflects both the Situationists' and Bertolt Brecht's emphasis on play and wit as a potential catalyst for subversive realization. According to Brecht, humour and entertainment are tools that can be used to "engage the audience actively, rather than luring them

into a state of passive reception” (Downing, 2001, p. 62). The dichotomy between entertainment and critical consciousness as perpetuated by critiques of popular culture is broken down, in the belief that humour and play can foster new pathways for engagement and confrontation.

Banksy’s works draw on dark humour in irreverent and unexpected ways, for example, poking fun at the authorities by depicting them in compromised positions – a police officer urinating, or illegally spraying “God Save the Queen” on a wall. In constructing his work this way, Banksy offers a novel approach to engage with art in the streets and more broadly, the anti-establishment and anti-capitalist critiques inscribed in his work.

Despite the clear links we can make between Banksy and the art historical lineage of avant-garde political art movements, it is evident that Banksy does not comfortably exist in the category of avant-garde artists – or even graffiti artists such as Basquiat or Haring whose work on the streets eventually led to careers and widespread recognition in the established art world. Despite his unparalleled critique of the art world, to a certain degree, Banksy has capitalized on his success in it, as evidenced by the positive reception to his work and the commercial success of his art. I would suggest that to a certain extent, we can understand Banksy’s position as an insider/outsider artist through the position of what Howard Becker (1982) terms the “maverick artist”, or those art practitioners who largely operate beyond the accepted practices of the conventional art world. Mavericks resort to unconventional methods for the production and display of their work, and eschew the gallery and traditional modes of distribution for their art (Becker, 1982). They largely work outside the realm of the established art world, designating alternative methods of production and distribution, circumnavigating the need for art world institutions. As Becker suggests, mavericks who are visual artists “create their own display spaces or, more comprehensively, devise works which cannot be exhibited in museums and

galleries...thus escaping what they feel to be the stylistic tyranny of museum directors, curators, and financial supporters" (1982, p. 235). Indeed, though Banksy's primary space of display has been the streets, he has also organized a number of exhibitions independently in warehouse spaces, bypassing the institutions typically mobilized to organize such an exhibition, while still constructing a space for the display of his art that is akin to the traditional spaces of the art establishment. Another example of this is Pictures on Walls, which has also been developed and organized in part by Banksy in order to provide alternative opportunities for individuals to materially participate in the street art culture without having to pay thousands of dollars at a Sotheby's auction. However, Becker suggests that "most mavericks' work is not absorbed into the canon of an art world; they remain unknown, and their work is not preserved and disappears along with their name" (1982, p. 246). Thus, Banksy's work and career path complicate Becker's notion of the "maverick artist" given that his works have become widely popular within the art establishment, fetching high prices at auctions and gallery shows alike and positive reception among the elite curators, auctioneers, and collectors of the established art world.

Two concepts are of particular utility when attempting to reconcile the apparent contradiction in Banksy's position as an insider/outsider artist. Firstly, we can understand the positive response to Banksy's work and incorporation of it in the established art world through Nathalie Heinich's theory of *The Triple Game of Contemporary Art* (1998) and her concept of the "singularity regime" in which the art world marginalizes artists while simultaneously distinguishing others as geniuses (Danko, 2008). In outlining the singularity regime's effects on the art world, Heinich details the paradoxical process through which the transgressive moment becomes mandatory in three steps: "the production of contemporary art as transgression, the reception of art in the form of rejection, and the integration of this art by intermediary

institutions such as museums” (Danko, 2008, p. 244). While Heinrich considers Vincent Van Gogh to be the epitome of the “accursed artist” subject to the singularity regime, I would argue that to a degree the incorporation of Banksy’s works in the contemporary art world illustrates the utility of this model, as his works explicitly subvert and transgress the established practices and principles of the elite art world, yet have been embraced by it. In this sense we can understand the integration of Banksy’s works into the art establishment as indicative of what Heinrich’s describes as the “regime of vocation” in which artists are seen as “a creator by vocation and by personal inclination, whose works of art are expected to be unique, original innovative, and outstanding” (Danko, 2008, p. 247).

Yet it would seem impulsive to characterize Banksy’s works as entirely subversive and transgressive against the principles and practices of the established art world, and suggest that the art world simply happens to appropriate his work. Indeed, Banksy’s strategies seem to betray a degree of calculation in his approach, and in this sense he can be seen as following the avant-garde traditions exemplified by Marcel Duchamp and the Dadaists, who demonstrated the value of “shaking up” the art world to generate public attention and in turn become reputable artists. This is perhaps best illustrated by the close guarding of Banksy’s identity. While this move has been explicitly attributed to the need to remain anonymous for fear of legal and criminal repercussions, it undoubtedly also serves to generate public interest around Banksy, so much so that some commentators have wondered if his works would retain the same value if his identity was made public. In this way, we can understand the anonymization of Banksy’s identity as a conscious strategy for creating hype around the Banksy name. Therefore, the textual artifacts officially associated with Banksy – for example, his website, www.banksy.co.uk, and his books, of which *Wall and Piece* is one, also serve as pieces of branding to further emphasize Banksy’s

anonymity and communicate the anti-establishment, anti-capitalist themes running through Banksy's art as a whole. This reflects the suggestion by Dickens (2010) that street art seems to have "more intrinsic, if not privileged, relationships with art and commerce" (p. 64). As demonstrated by Droney (2010), it would seem that Banksy, and the street art culture as a whole is acutely aware of the critical tensions between art/commerce, street/gallery, art/crime, inside/outside; their approach to inscribing the city thus seems to be defined by an effort to complicate and break down these binaries commonly associated with street art. They are simultaneously complicit *and* critical, in the process blurring the lines between culture and counterculture. As Beth McAdam suggested, this new generation of urban inscribers "move back and forth between culture and counter-culture, operating inside and outside the system" (as cited by Dickens, 2008, p. 477). In this way, the convergence and divergence of these themes can be interpreted as inherent to street art itself, the "locus in which an incoherent, and often contradictory plurality of relational determinations interact" through the course of space and time. They are the instances of creative – and often ambiguous and contradictory – opportunity that operate within the interstices of conventional thought and the patterns of everyday life (de Certeau, 1980, p. 64).

Conclusion: Street art in motion

Arjun Appadurai suggests, "it is through things in motion that we may understand their social and material contexts" (as cited by Dickens, 2008, p. 477). As Dickens points out (2008), I would suggest that the opposite is also true, that is, it is through shifting social and material contexts that we may understand things in motion. In this Honours thesis, I have attempted to untangle and make apparent the tensions between art, politics, and commerce as they come to be

configured through an emerging form of street art practice, through a case study of Banksy, one of the leading figures of the contemporary street art movement. Rather than demonstrating that street art adheres to the old models of “selling out”, Banksy’s case seems to point to a need to develop and articulate new models of understanding street art as a developing form of urban inscription more consciously positioned between art, politics, and commerce. Street art is perhaps most explicitly concerned with the recuperation of space from the public to the private, from the few to the many, and the analysis of Banksy’s work has certainly reflected this theme. He is explicitly critical of the established art world, mass consumption and capitalist society; visual spectacle; and authoritarian encroachment. However, analyzing these critical themes inherent in Banksy’s works within the contexts of their production, distribution, and reception clearly problematize any unilateral interpretation of his work as being entirely countercultural – he is critical, but also complicit. He is evidently implicated in the production and reproduction of the cultural industry, and in doing so reaffirms the rule of the maverick artist and the regime of singularity in the contemporary art world; critiques commodity capitalism but uses mediated channels as extensions of his fame. In this sense, *Wall and Piece* embodies the contradictions inherent in this emerging cultural practice, simultaneously operating as an anti-authoritarian, anti-establishment text, *and* a material object that generates additional publicity – and profit – for its author. Therefore, I would suggest that there is a sort of negotiated flexibility that seems to be inherent in street art practice, something that meaningfully distinguishes it from previous forms of graffiti, which take a largely oppositional stance to the art establishment and thus exist entirely outside, or inside of the walls of the gallery. Street art, on the other hand, more consciously blurs the lines between culture and counterculture, moving freely and selectively between these two

positions. In this way, street art complicates the assumption that urban inscription is a “tactic of the weak in an attempt to counter strategies of the strong” (Dickens, 2008, p. 488).

In discussing the idea of reclamation of the city – “transformatory practice (and politics) that works to bring the everyday to the foreground of social life so as to reorientate its practices” Ben Highmore suggests that this work also involves the

[R]eclamation of complexity and contradiction from accounts that might all too easily sideline such troublesome material. The awkward actualities to be found in the everyday, the uneasy ambivalence that makes it difficult to either condemn or condone, might seem to characterize the landscape of the everyday” (Highmore, 2002, p. 224).

As an urban cultural form, street art exists first and foremost in the spaces of our cities; yet as this study of Banksy has demonstrated, it is a form of urban inscription that is multi-layered and multi-faceted. The challenge then becomes for researchers to ground their understandings in the complexity and contradiction that is intrinsic to this practice, as it transforms with the shifting contexts of its production, distribution, and reception.

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Appendix

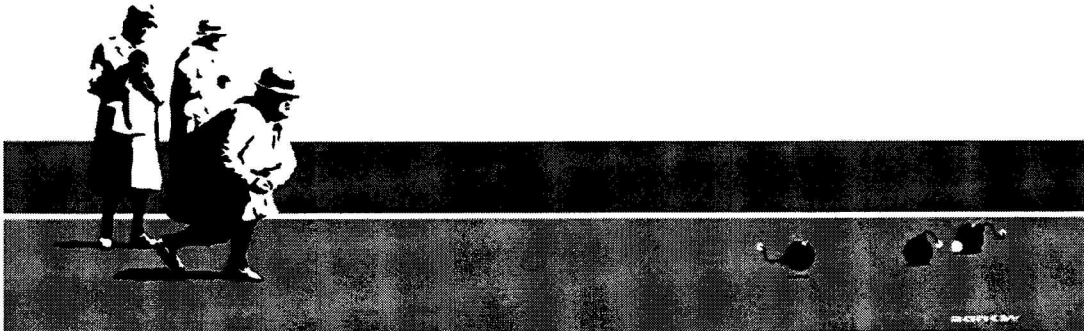


Figure 1. Bombing Middle England, Banksy, 2003
Image from Max Atkinson (<http://maxatkinson.blogspot.ca>)



Figure 2. I can't believe you morons actually buy this shit, Banksy, 2007
Image from Original Prints (<http://originalprints.com>)



Figure 3. Murdered Phone Booth, Banksy, 2006
Image from Artlet (<http://artlet-blog.com>)

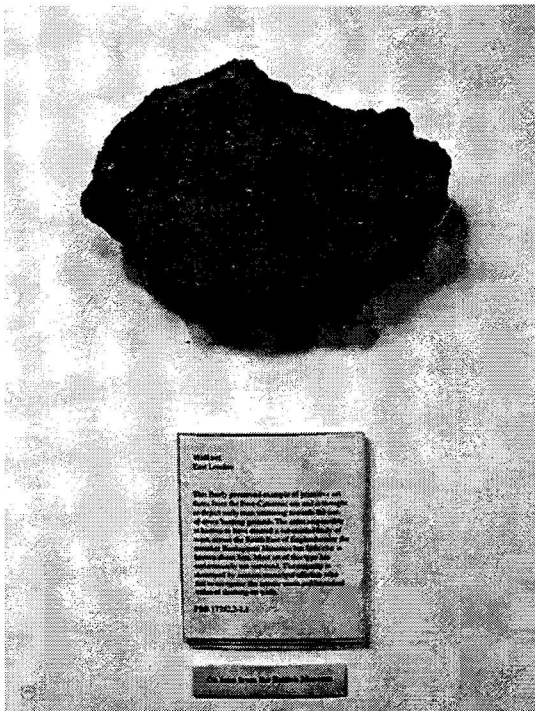


Image 4. Peckham Rock, Banksy, 2005
Image from Flickrriver (<http://flickrriver.com>)



Figure 5. *The Drinker*, Banksy, 2004.

Image from Silverfox09 Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/silverfox09>)



Figure 6. *Introduction* from *Wall and Piece* (Banksy, 2005)



The corrupt and brutal regime of President Ceausescu of Romania was infamous across the world. His ferocious government had run the country emphatically for many years, crushing any signs of dissent ruthlessly. In November 1989 he was re-elected President for another five years as his supporters at Party Conference gave him forty standing ovations.

On December 21st the President, disturbed by a small uprising in the western city of Timisoara in support of a Protestant Clergyman, was persuaded to address a public rally in Bucharest.

One solitary man in the crowd, Nicolae Ceausescu, sick to death with Ceausescu and the dreadful circumstances he created for everyone started shouting in favour of the revolutionaries in Timisoara. The crowd around him, obedient to the last, thought that when he shouted out 'long live Timisoara!' it was some new political slogan.

They started chanting it too. It was only when he called, 'Down with Ceausescu!' that they realised something wasn't right. Terrified, they tried to force themselves away from him, dropping the banners they had been carrying. In the crush the wooden balconies on which the banners were held began to snap underfoot and women started screaming. The ensuing panic sounded like boiling.

The unthinkable was happening. Ceausescu stood there on his balcony, ludicrously frozen in uncertainty, his mouth opening and shutting. Even the official cameras shook with fright. Then the head of security walked swiftly across the balcony towards him and whispered, 'They're getting it. It was clearly audible on the open microphone and was broadcast over the whole country on live national radio.'

This was the start of the revolution. Within a week Ceausescu was dead.

Source: John Simpson BBC News

Figure 7. Revolution from *Wall and Piece* (Banksy, 2005)

Broken Window Theory

Criminologists James Q. Wilson and George Kelling developed a theory of criminal behaviour in the 1980's that became known as the 'Broken Window Theory'. They argued crime was the inevitable result of disorder and that if a window in a building is smashed but not repaired people walking by will think no-one cares. Then more windows will be broken, graffiti will appear and rubbish get dumped. The likelihood of serious crime being committed then increases dramatically as neglect becomes visible. The researchers believed there was a direct link between vandalism, street violence and the general decline of society. This theory was the basis of the infamous New York City crime purge of the early nineties and the zero-tolerance attitude to graffiti.

Letter received to Banksy website

I don't know who you are or how many of you there are but I am writing to ask you to stop painting your things where we live, in particular xxxxxx road in Hackney. My brother and me were from here and have lived here all our lives but these days so many youths and students are moving here neither of us can afford to buy a house where we grew up anymore. Your graffiti are undoubtedly part of what makes these youths think our area is cool. You're obviously not from round here and after you've given up the house prices your probably just move on. Do us all a favour and go do your stuff somewhere else like Burton.

daniel (name and address not withheld)



Fig. 8. London 2004.

Figure 8. Broken Window Theory (sic.) from *Wall and Piece* (Banksy, 2005)

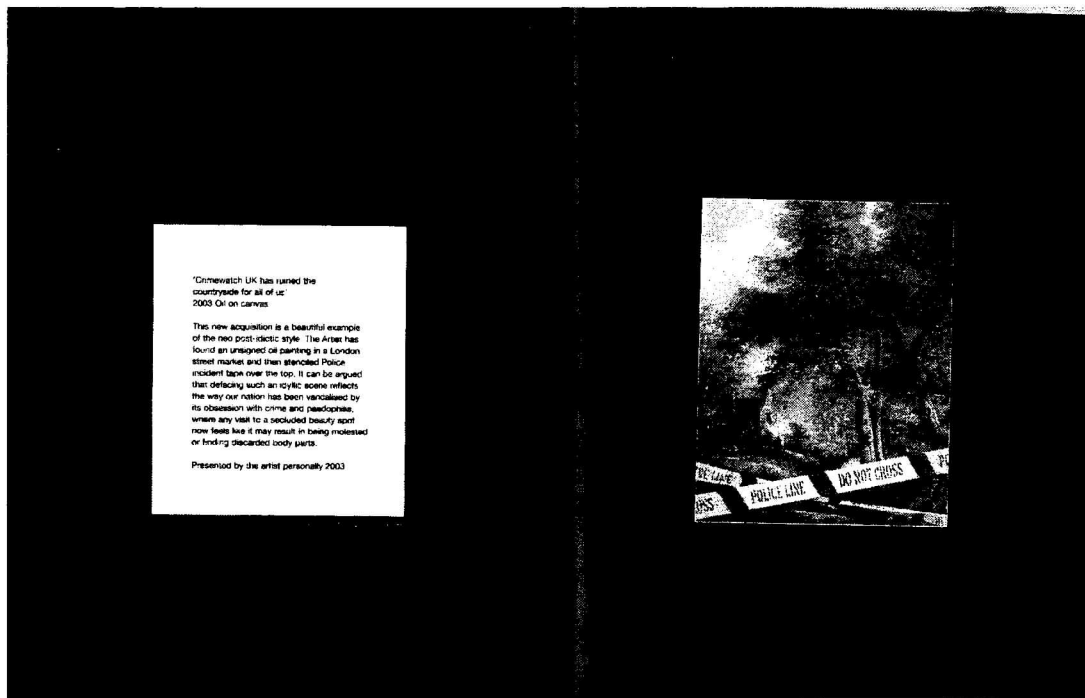


Figure 9. *Crimewatch UK has ruined the countryside for all of us* (pp. 169-170) from *Wall and Piece* (Banksy, 2005)



Figure 10. *Crimewatch UK has ruined the countryside for all of us* [Installation] (pp. 171-172) from *Wall and Piece* (Banksy, 2005)